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# Night Scenes: For a Nocturnal History of Architecture

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# SAH 76th Annual International Conference

## *Night Scenes: For a Nocturnal History of Architecture*

April 14, 2023

Session Co-chairs: Javier Fernández Contreras, Roberto Zancan  
Society of Architectural Historians (SAH), Montreal

For centuries, architectural theory and discourse have been grounded in diurnal paradigms. Vitruvius made scant references to the night in *De Architectura*, and a similar absence can be identified in Renaissance treatises by Alberti and Palladio. Since the invention of electric lighting in the 19th century, the urban environment has witnessed an expansion and intensification of human activity. Nowadays, we sleep one hour less than a hundred years ago, with people working and socializing well into the night. Time has become elastic: from casinos to nightclubs, movie theaters, and corner shops, cultural and retail spaces are inseparable from the nocturnal experience. On one hand, a *Nocturnal History of Architecture* reveals neglected areas of scholarship; on the other, it may offer a laboratory for the development of alternative forms of architectural historiography. Building on the work of scholars such as Dietrich Neumann and Sandy Isenstadt, papers in this session explore the broad topic of night and architecture across a wide range of historical periods.

\* This session builds upon and completes the symposium *Nocturnal History of Architecture*, which was held at HEAD – Genève in December 2021.

Program:

3:00 PM UTC–05:00 Introduction

3:05 PM UTC–05:00 *On Backwardness: Swiss Resistance and Electric Light, 1900–1970*, Chase Galis, ETH Zürich, Switzerland

In 1966, an article in the Swiss satirical magazine *Nebelspalter* commented on the outcome of a public vote in the rural Alpine village of Obermatten: “In 1946 and again in 1965, this unenlightened village rejected the attempt to install electric lighting. So much backwardness! Meanwhile ... the Americans hope to land an astronaut on the moon in 1968.” As late as the 1970s, numerous villages in Switzerland remained in the dark—adopting active positions of resistance against electric lighting and its association with ideologies of modernization.

Instances of rural resistance, as seen in Obermatten, defy the prevailing narrative of Swiss electrification, commonly portrayed as a process enjoying widespread public support. However, when this socially-motivated ‘expansion of infrastructure’ reached rural locations, it was met not with absolute support but rather a series of diverse and fragmented reactions, including cases of organized resistance—particularly targeting the aesthetic, social, and environmental effects of electric lighting seen to be incompatible with Swiss pastoral traditions and their fundamental attachment to natural conditions of darkness in the landscape.

Focusing on rural settings in Switzerland, this paper examines the scope of resistance against electric lighting between the 1900s and the 1970s. A look at nocturnal landscapes and peripheral housing sites provides a key starting point for understanding how electric lighting was perceived through its technological links with the rural environment. By extending the timeframe beyond the initial implementation of electrical infrastructure, this analysis offers insights into how various forms of resistance against electric lighting transcended temporal, geographic, and political divisions in 20th-century Switzerland. In this sense, the reactions against electric lighting can be disentangled from the dismissive characterizations of “backwardness,” typical of urban-centered, public discourse.

3:25 PM UTC–05:00 *Byzantine Night: Subterranean Darkness as Productive Space*, Maria Shevelkina, Stanford University, USA

Byzantine monastic worship spaces were most often used for their primary purpose, *i.e.*, liturgy, at night and in the early morning. Precious sunlight hours were occupied with attending to critical tasks necessary for daily existence, occurring outdoors or in other areas of the monastery. Byzantine art and architectural historians have extensively studied the symbolic and structural production and function of light in sacred spaces. It is pointedly

more difficult to consider the effect of night and its lack of sunlight on the encountered architectural forms and superimposed images, especially given the lack of vision inherent to darkness. This study considers the phenomenological effect of one such space engulfed in darkness as a case study for further expansion into the field. Furthermore, this study offers avenues for considering the production of affective space.

The subterranean crypt of the main church at Hosios Loukas in Stiris, Greece, constructed in the 11th century, is set beneath a standard cross-in-square plan. The crypt is a low-ceilinged space with ten widely set groin vaults and is entirely frescoed. Three large marble sarcophagus tombs obstruct the floor plan, and only a single arched window pierces the eastern apse. Embedded metal hooks, interspersed throughout the ceiling, indicate the prevalence of hanging oil lamps, the main source of artificial light, aided by free-standing candelabras. Local *typika* and modern excavations indicate the prescriptive use of this space for burial and healing rites. Although cold, damp, and stony, the crypt was required to function as a common space for monastics and laypeople alike and therefore produced its own source of light and warmth for retaining and nourishing its visitors. As a self-contained space replete with references to external *chrono-topes*, the crypt took advantage of the night, creating an environment that embraced darkness.

3:45 PM UTC–05:00 *Urban Slavery and the Architecture of Sleep in 19th-Century Brazil*, Amy Chazkel, Columbia University, USA

This paper is part of ongoing research on the history of nighttime in postcolonial Rio de Janeiro (c. 1820s-1880s). Geographers Richard Dennis and Philip Gordon Macintosh have explored the "architecture of hurry": the way modern city structures have grown in tandem with demands for accelerated mobility and the compression of time. Research on the history of the city after nightfall demonstrates another dimension of urban modernity; while this busy port city depended on the swift movement of people and goods, the fact that as many as half of its population was enslaved during these decades also created a perceived need to impose order and discipline on the urban population. Indeed, this period bore witness to the beginnings of commercial nightlife and public illumination, even while Rio's enslaved residents—and, in effect, all people of African descent—were under nightly curfew for most of the 19th century.

The presentation explores the connection between mobility and artificial illumination by reconstructing the architecture not of "hurry" but rather of rest. Enslaved residents of the city who were technically forbidden to be in the streets after curfew nonetheless performed indispensable labor that could not and did not end at sunset. This equivocal approach to urban slavery in the 19th-century "age of freedom" meant that neither private homes nor public areas of the city had formally designed spaces where enslaved workers could sleep. They instead found makeshift places to rest in corridors, alleys, warehouses, and squares. Using arrest records, other police documents, and the paper trail that the use of enslaved labor for public illumination generated, the paper shows how the legally enforced difference between day and night gave rise to a vernacular architecture to accommodate daily rest and, in effect, physically 'made' the modern city.

4:05 PM UTC–05:00 *"Inexistent Architecture": A Typology of Nightclub Architecture*, Catharine Rossi, University of the Creative Arts, UK

"Inexistent architecture," this is how architect Carlo Calдини described Space Electronic (1969), the experimental Florentine nightclub he co-designed and ran as part of Italian Radical Design collective Gruppo 9999. *Space Electronic* epitomizes what Calдини recognized as the architectural specificity of this then-fledgling typology; one made not by bricks and mortar but by artificial lighting and sound. *Space Electronic* only existed at night, when the lights were on, the speakers were blaring, and bodies were animating its contained interior.

This paper offers the dual qualities of "inexistent" and "existent" architecture to explore the nightclub's architectural history. It builds on the author's earlier research into Radical Design's under-recognized nightclub experiments to investigate more fully the effects of intangible technologies in shaping interiors. It also expands the scope of research to expose the globally interconnected nature of nightclub spaces, from Paris's Whisky à Go Go (1947), to New York's Electric Circus (1967) and Studio 54 (1981), to Italy's Radical clubs and Hong Kong's Canton Disco (1985).

Using primary sources including interviews with nightclub owners and architects, photographs and architectural drawings, archival film and copies of *Lighting and Sound International*, alongside literature from areas including architecture and design history (French, 2022; Nott, 2015) and queer theory (Betsky, 1997), this paper aims to contribute to the growing area of nightclub architectural history. As well as showing how innovations in nightclub architecture occurred through international connections, it makes links to other nocturnal and entertainment architectural typologies that are dependent on the use of artificial technologies to create spaces sealed off from daylight and diurnal rhythms. Looking at spaces such as theaters and television studios not only underscores the temporal dimension to our experience and understanding of interiors but also demonstrates nightclubs' embeddedness in late 20th-century architectural culture, despite their near inexistence in its history.

4:25 PM UTC-05:00 Q&A/Discussion

5:10 PM UTC-05:00 Session ends

Session Co-chairs:

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Roberto Zancan, HEAD — Genève

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